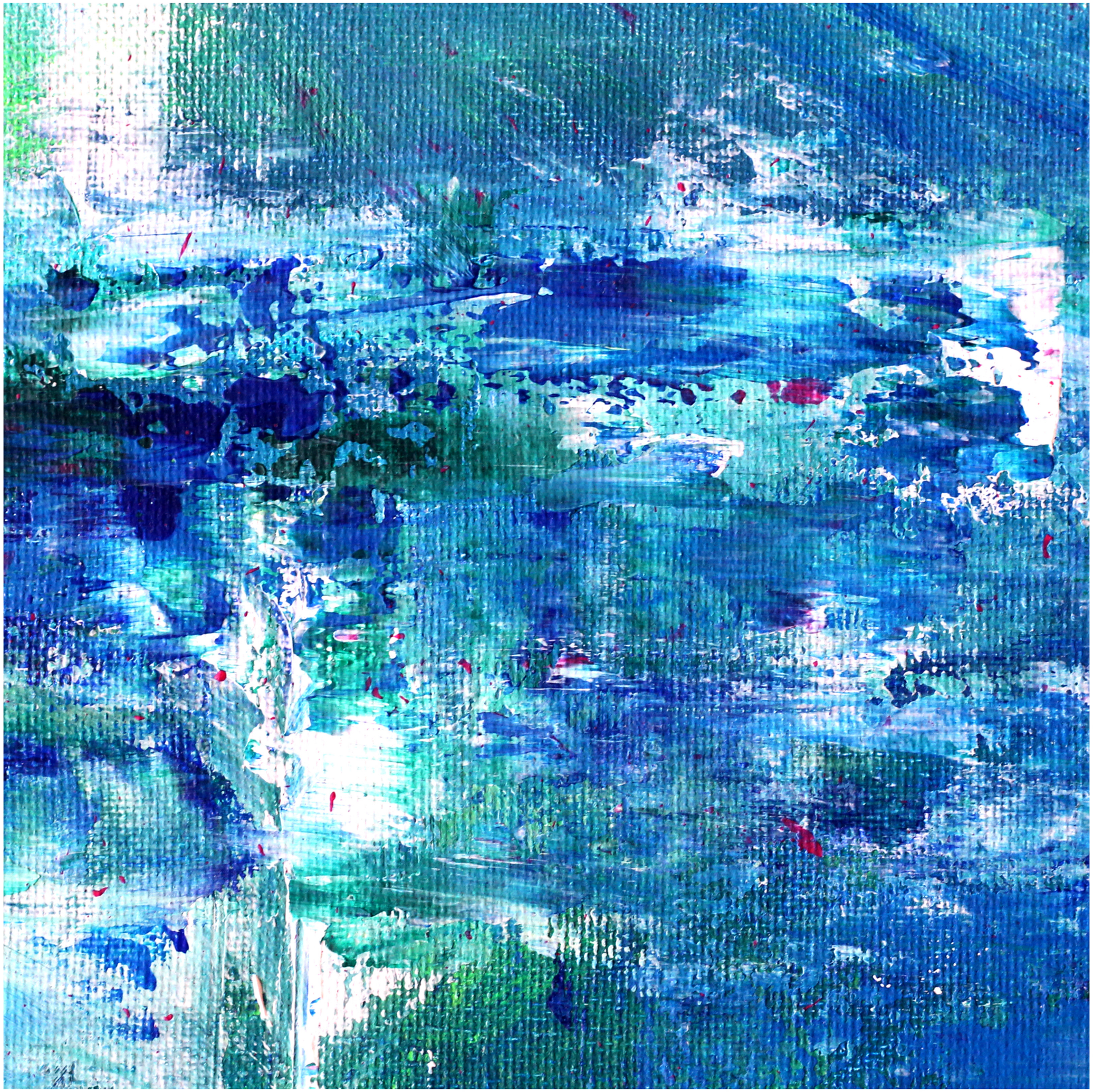
SANSARA



UNITED STRINGS OF EUROPE

in the midst

in the midst

TRACK LISTING

1. Hildur Guðnadóttir (arr. Peter Stanley Martin) **Fólk fær andlit** (05:26)
2. Caroline Shaw **To the Hands: I. Prelude - Wordless** (02:20)
3. Caroline Shaw **To the Hands: II. in medio / in the midst** (03:14)
4. Caroline Shaw **To the Hands: III. Her beacon-hand beckons** (03:41)
5. Caroline Shaw **To the Hands: IV. ever ever ever** (02:59)
6. Caroline Shaw **To the Hands: V. Litany of the Displaced** (02:38)
7. Caroline Shaw **To the Hands: VI. i will hold you** (03:12)
8. Piers Connor Kennedy/Julian Azkoul **in the midst** (04:55)
9. Caroline Shaw **In manus tuas** (07:55)
10. Houtaf Khoury **The Journey** (12:28)
11. Thomas Tallis **In manus tuas** (02:17)
12. Caroline Shaw (arr. Piers Connor Kennedy) **and the swallow** (04:10)

ALBUM BLURB

Today, millions are forcibly displaced from their homes, set on perilous journeys in search of places of safety. Finding refuge depends on the kindness of others - individuals, communities and nations. But the longing for sanctuary is not always met with open arms.

***In the midst* sees SANSARA and United Strings of Europe join forces to explore these confronting themes in a programme built around two musical pillars: Caroline Shaw's *To the Hands*, with its guiding question 'what are these wounds in the midst of *our* hands?', and *The Journey* by Houtaf Khoury.**

Featuring additional music by Hildur Guðnadóttir, Piers Connor Kennedy and Thomas Tallis, *In the midst* is not only an offering of musical solidarity, but an invitation to reflect on our role in creating spaces of sanctuary.

PROGRAMME NOTE

We open with Hildur Guðnadóttir's haunting **Fólk fær andlit**, written in response to the mistreatment and deportations of refugees in Iceland in 2015, in an arrangement for choir and string drone by Peter Stanley Martin. Two fragments of text are repeated throughout the piece: a lone voice sings the Icelandic word 'miskun' ('mercy') as a repeated phrase before being joined by increasingly impassioned iterations of the phrase 'Fyrirgefið okkur fyrir' ('forgive us for') from the rest of the choir. The individual and the group are set against each other in stark contrast and the piece ends with a return to the isolated voice, hanging above the unmoving low strings.

This tension is carried into Caroline Shaw's **To the Hands**, with its ambitious range of images spread across six movements. Commissioned by The Crossing Choir as a response to *Ad manus* from Buxtehude's *Membra Jesu Nostri*, Shaw's *To the Hands* is a striking contemporary cantata which transforms its source material and integrates it seamlessly into Shaw's distinct soundworld. The composer writes:

> "*To the Hands* begins inside the 17th century sound of Buxtehude. It expands and colors and breaks this language, as the piece's core considerations, of the suffering of those around the world seeking refuge, and of our role and responsibility in these global and local crises, gradually come into focus.

The prelude turns the tune of *Ad manus* into a wordless plainchant melody, punctured later by the strings' introduction of an unsettling pattern. The second movement fragments Buxtehude's choral setting of the central question, 'quid sunt plagae istae in medio manuum tuarum', or 'what are these wounds in the midst of your hands.' It settles finally on an inversion of the question, so that we reflect, 'what are these wounds in the midst of *our* hands?' We notice what may have been done to us, but we also question what we have done and what our role has been in these wounds we see before us.

The text that follows in the third movement is a riff on Emma Lazarus' sonnet *The New Colossus*, famous for its engraving at the base of the Statue of Liberty. The poem's lines 'Give me your tired, your poor,/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free' and its reference to the statue's 'beacon-hand' present a very different image of a hand – one that is open, beckoning, and strong. No wounds are to be found there – only comfort for those caught in a dangerous and complex environment. While the third movement operates in broad strokes from a distance, the fourth movement zooms in on the map so far that we see the intimate scene of an old woman in her home, maybe setting the table for dinner alone. Who is she, where has she been, whose lives has she left? This simple image melts into a meditation on the words *in caverna* from the Song of Solomon, found in Buxtehude's fourth section, *Ad latus*.

In the fifth movement, the harmony is passed around from one string instrument to another, overlapping only briefly, while numerical figures are spoken by the choir. These are global figures of internally displaced persons, by country, sourced from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) data reported in May 2015. Sometimes data is the cruellest and most honest poetry.

The sixth and final movement unfolds the words *in caverna* into the tumbling and comforting promise of 'ever ever' – 'ever ever will I hold you, ever ever will I enfold you'. They could be the words of Christ, or of a parent or friend or lover, or even of a nation."

The final violin pizzicato figure at the end of *To the Hands* melds into a specially-commissioned work by SANSARA bass and composer Piers Connor Kennedy. With violin improvisation from United Strings of Europe's artistic director Julian Azkoul, **in the midst** layers fragments from the Shaw - itself based on music by Buxtehude - into a complex web of vocal textures which build towards a climax on the text 'in medio manuum nostrarum' ('in the midst of our hands').

Julian's approach on the violin is inspired by his Lebanese heritage, with idioms typical of *taqasim* - improvisations in Arabic music that explore a range of modes above a drone. Despite moments of discord and friction, the interplay of musical and cultural styles in this work at the heart of our programme is a yearning for greater understanding and empathy. This introduction of a solo string voice in this piece paves the way for the instrumental works that follow.

"Expert interlocking of exquisite voices in a sound that takes us beyond our everyday selves."

- Edinburgh Music Review on SANSARA

Commissioned by United Strings of Europe and the second musical pillar of the programme, Houtaf Khoury's **The Journey** is a searing work for violin and string ensemble. Born in Tripoli in 1967, Khoury is one of Lebanon's leading composers. The formative influences on his music came from Ukraine, where a grant enabled him to pursue studies in Kyiv from 1988 to 1997, culminating in a doctorate in musicology. His orchestral works, chamber music and compositions for piano are pleas for a more humane world.

> "*The Journey*, dedicated to my friend Julian Azkoul and the United Strings of Europe, is a work which I started to compose at a time of great turmoil; on the one hand there were the stifling restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic and on the other the rapidlydeteriorating economic situation in Lebanon. The title was inspired by the work *Unfinished Journey* by the great Franco-Lebanese composer Bechara El khoury. *The Journey* is a reflection on our inner lives, a yearning for greater freedom, and a wish to see our humanity restored."

The Journey is framed - or held - by two dramatically different versions of **In manus tuas** ('into your hands'). The first by Caroline Shaw is a reflection on Thomas Tallis' original motet of the same title.

Performed by violist Ruth Gibson, Shaw's take is a dramatic exploration of texture and harmony: the first tentative steps in a search for meaning, with occasional sung notes giving the sense of a voice being rediscovered or perhaps heard for the first time.

In contrast with the contemporary soundworld of the rest of the programme, Tallis' **In manus tuas** reaches out to us from late 16th century England, fusing the current need for human connection with a timeless longing and need to be held.

The programme is rounded off with a new arrangement of Caroline Shaw's **and the swallow** by Piers Connor Kennedy for choir and strings. Originally commissioned by the Netherlands Chamber Choir as an a cappella piece, *and the swallow* sets text from Psalm 84 describing the yearning for a place to call home. This new version brings together choir and strings in a subtly crafted combination that gives the sense of two choirs, one with text and one textless, both conveying the same message of compassion.

Music has the unique capacity to hold cultural memory. Our aim with this recording is to capture a moment when the meaning held in these works feels acutely relevant and important. Our hope is that these recordings will inspire future iterations of these pieces, each performance surfacing in sound the deeply felt emotions enshrined within them.

Tom Herring & Julian Azkoul, June 2024

TEXTS & TRANSLATIONS

Guðnadóttir (rr. Martin) - Fólk fær andlit

Miskun
Fyrirgefið okkur fyrir

Mercy
Forgive us for

Shaw - To the Hands

II. in medio / in the midst

quid sunt plagae istae
quid sunt plagae istae in medio manuum tuarum
in medio
quid sunt plagae istae
quid sunt plagae istae in medio manuum nostrarum

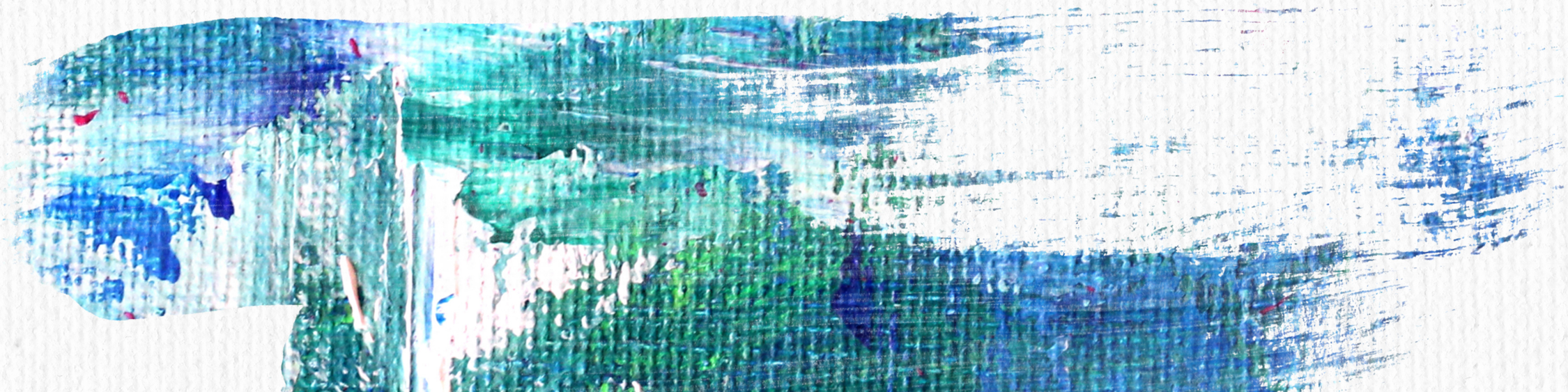
what are those wounds
what are those wounds in the midst of your hands
in the midst
what are those wounds
what are those wounds in the midst of our hands

Text from Buxtehude's *Ad manus*: Zechariah 13:6 - adapted by Caroline Shaw, with the addition of 'in medio manuum nostrarum'
('in the midst of our hands')

III. Her beacon-hand beckons

Her beacon-hand beckons:
give
give to me
those yearning to breathe free
tempest-tossed they cannot see
what lies beyond the olive tree
whose branch was lost amid the pleas
for mercy, mercy
give
give to me
your tired fighters fleeing flying
from the
from the
from
let them
i will be your refuge
i will be your refuge
i will be
i will be
we will be
we will

Text by Caroline Shaw, responding to the 1883 sonnet *The New Colossus* by Emma Lazarus, which was mounted on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in 1903



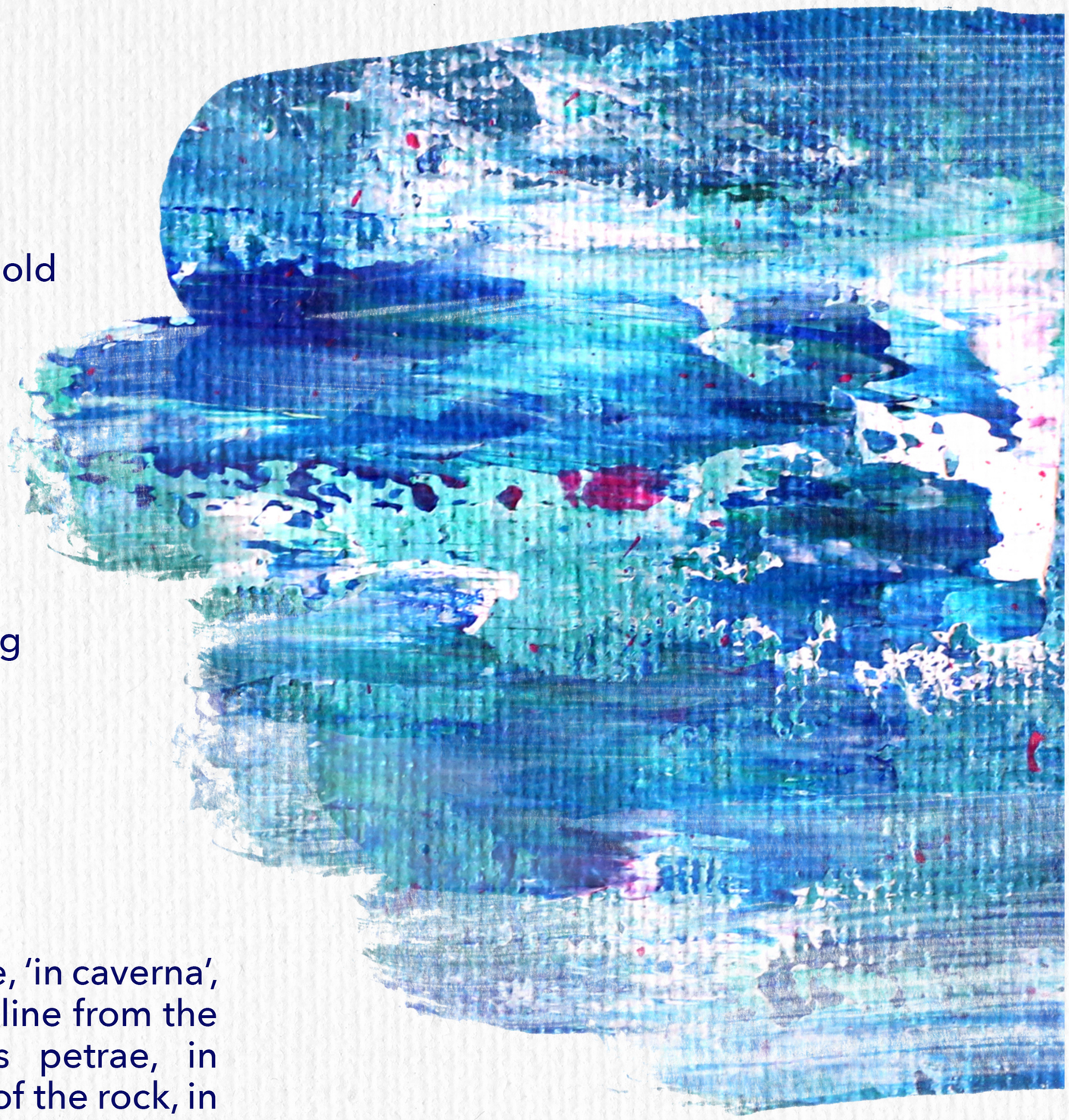
IV. ever ever ever

ever ever ever
in the window sills or
the beveled edges
of the aging wooden frames that hold
old photographs
hands folded
folded
gently in her lap

ever ever
in the crevices
the never-ending efforts of
the grandmother's tendons tending
to her bread and empty chairs

left for Elijahs
where are they now
in caverna
in caverna

Text by Caroline Shaw: the final line, 'in caverna', is from Buxtehude's *Ad latus* - the line from the Song of Songs, 'in foraminibus petrae, in caverna maceriae', or 'in the clefts of the rock, in the hollow of the cliff'



V. Litany of the Displaced

The choir speaks global figures of internal displacement, sourced from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (http://www.internal-displacement.org/global-figures – accessed 01/03/2016). The numbers spoken are the numbers of internally displaced persons by country, in ascending order. These are people, some of whom may have legal refugee status, who have been displaced within their own country due to armed conflict, situations of generalized violence or violations of human rights.

"Out of the plethora of vocal ensembles in the UK, SANSARA stands out for me as something really exceptional"

- Judith Weir DBE, Master of the King's Music

VI. i will hold you

i would hold you
i would hold you
ever ever will i hold you
ever ever will i enfold you

in medio
in medio
in medio
in medio
in medio
in medio manuum tuarum

Text by Caroline Shaw: the final line is a reprise from the Zechariah text

Kennedy - in the midst

Quid sunt plagae istae in medio manuum nostrarum?

What are those wounds in the midst of our hands?

Tallis - In manus tuas

In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum.
Redemisti me Domine, Deus veritatis.

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.
You have redeemed me, O Lord, O God of truth.

Compline Respond. Psalm 30: 6

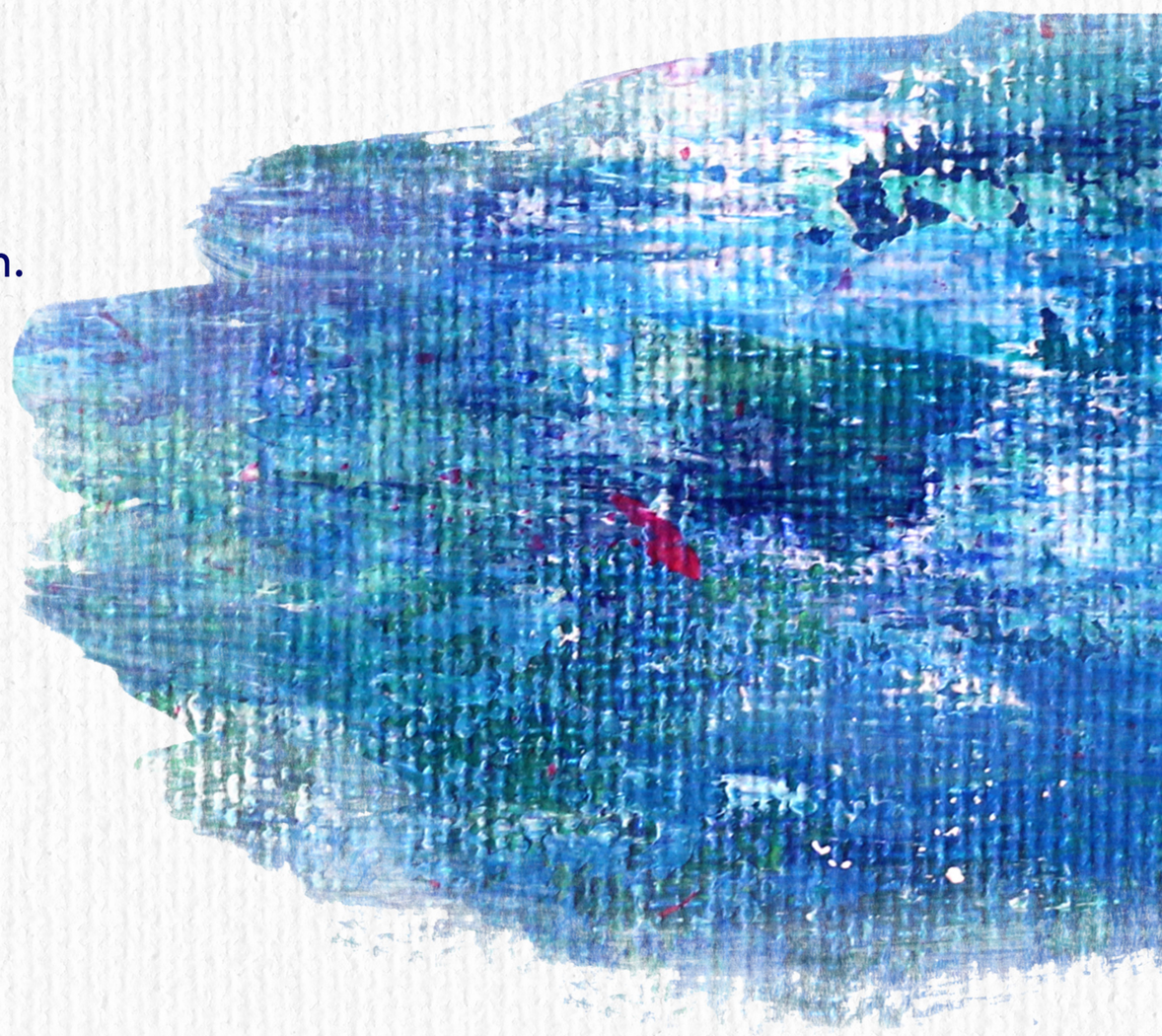
Shaw (arr. Kennedy)
- and the swallow

How beloved is your dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts
my soul yearns, faints,
my heart and my flesh cry

The sparrow found a house
and the swallow, her nest,
where she may raise her young

They pass through the valley of bakka
they make it a place of springs
the autumn rains also cover it with
pools

Psalm 84



SANSARA

SANSARA is a collective of professional singers, composers, and creatives from across the UK. Together, we're committed to reimagining the choral experience

Our name echoes the ancient Sanskrit word 'samsara' - the transformational experience of moving through life's cycles. A choir is a living, breathing instrument fuelled by the primal force of the human voice and its power to move, challenge, console - to *transform* hearts and minds. Inspired by this belief, we share choral music old and new to create spaces for reflection and renewal - whatever that means for you. From intimate a cappella performances to immersive vocal soundscapes, in a beautiful venue or through your headphones, we invite you to join us.

We engage with the complex, messy issues of our time. The cycles of modern life can be overwhelming. Despite our digital connections, feelings of loneliness and social isolation are on the rise. Our work is rooted in the transformational potential of choral music to enhance people's mental and physical wellbeing.

Whether commissioning new music that brings refugee communities together, making a podcast about love and resistance, or using ensemble singing to support the journey through loss, we believe choral music can speak directly to those seeking creative responses to the challenges of today.

Our work is collaborative, experimental and forward-looking. Recent collaborations include projects with ensembles Manchester Collective, Fretwork, United Strings of Europe; composers Natalia Tsupryk, Piers Connor Kennedy, Rebecca Dale, Jasmin Kent Rodgman, Nico Muhly, Marco Galvani; and instrumentalists Basel Saleh, Julian Azkoul, Liam Byrne and Ruth Gibson.

Winners of the London International A Cappella Choir Competition, our performance highlights include concerts at the Southbank Centre, Barbican, Kings Place, St John's Smith Square, Bridgewater Hall, V&A, St Martin-in-the-Fields, Erholungshaus (Germany) and De Singel (Belgium).

Releases include *My North*, a commission by Rebecca Dale which was premiered at a commemorative event at the National Covid Memorial Wall, and *A Quiet Night - Tyhoyi Nochi* by Ukrainian composer Natalia Tsupryk, commissioned for Ukrainian Independence Day in August 2022. SANSARA's recordings have been broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and 4, Scala Radio, ABC and NPO Klassiek, and the group's previous album *Traces* (2023) was listed as Gramophone Magazine Editor's Choice.

sansarachoir.com
@sansarachoir

“SANSARA slips easily into the
elite ranks of exceptional performers”

- Choir & Organ on SANSARA

UNITED STRINGS OF EUROPE

The United Strings of Europe (USE) creates musical experiences that celebrate diversity and bridge cultural divides. Praised for its original programming and 'virtuosically expressive' playing (*The Times*), the London-based ensemble commissions and arranges music and performs regularly in Europe and the Middle East. A strong partenrship with BIS Records sees the ensemble release a new album each year. Past albums have been praised for their 'compelling programmes' (*BBC Music Magazine*), and characterised as 'superb' (*Gramophone*) and 'supremely executed' (*Stereophile*). The ensemble's second album Renewal was the Editor's Choice at Presto Music and one of Apple Music's '10 Albums You Must Hear' and their third album *Tchaikovsky* was *BBC Music Magazine's* Orchestral Choice (Feb 2023).

USE's collaborators include renowned soloists, composers, actors, dancers and theatrical directors. The ensemble's lockdown film *send back the echo* commissioned from composer/director Jasmin Kent Rodgman explored themes of disability and social alienation with deaf actor Vilma Jackson. It was released on BBC Arts in late 2020 before being selected for the London Short Film Festival in 2021. The following year USE partnered with four juggler-acrobats, director Bill Barclay and choreographer Sean Gandini to create the show *Apollo Resurrected* featuring a bespoke arrangement of Stravinsky's ballet *Apollon musagète* and a new commission from Joanna Marsh. The ensemble recently featured at The Night With Festival in Glasgow, Festival on the Close, the Byline and Southrepps Festivals in England, were artists-in-residence at Hatfield House, and made their debuts at King's Place, St. Martin-in-the-Fields, Northern Ballet, the Victoria Hall in Geneva, the Wigmore Hall, the Barbican with the BBC Singers, Reading Town Hall and Antwerp's De Singel.

Armed with the conviction that music and ensemble playing can enrich people's lives and promote cross-cultural understanding, the ensemble is committed to reaching new audiences through educational work and initiatives that engage young people, refugees and marginalised groups.

unitedstringseurope.com
@UnitedStringsEU
@unitedstringseurope

TOM HERRING

Tom Herring is an artistic director, conductor and singer with a passion for making impactful and engaging choral music. Known for his “breathtaking interpretations” (Choir & Organ) of a wide range of choral repertoire, Tom is co-founder and Artistic Director of SANSARA. Alongside his musical direction of the choir, Tom creates the group’s projects and programmes, working closely with partners on collaborative work including United Strings of Europe, Fretwork and Manchester Collective.

In demand as both a soloist and ensemble singer, Tom works regularly with leading choirs Tenebrae (Nigel Short) and the Monteverdi Choir (Sir John Eliot Gardiner) and has performed with groups including the Tallis Scholars (Peter Phillips), Alamire (David Skinner), Vox Luminis (Lionel Meunier) and Contrapunctus (Owen Rees). Since graduating from the University of Oxford in 2016, Tom has worked for several arts organisations including Oxford Lieder, Intermusica, the Association of British Orchestras, and Sulivan Sweetland. He is the former Producer of the Holy Week Festival (St John's Smith Square/Tenebrae), an alumnus of the Netherlands Chamber Choir's innovative NXT scheme and a mentor for Young People in the Arts.

JULIAN AZKOUL

Anglo-Lebanese violinist Julian Azkoul is in demand as an ensemble leader, soloist and collaborator, appearing as guest director of Britten Sinfonia, Camerata Nordica and Archets du Léman, and guest concertmaster of Ulster Orchestra, Façade Ensemble, Chineke!, Riot Ensemble, Camerata Venia and Nexus Orchestra. He has appeared as first violinist of the Jubilee and Piatti string quartets and co-lead UK orchestras including the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Hallé, RPO, CBSO and Manchester Collective.

He is the artistic director of the multinational string ensemble United Strings of Europe, curating programmes and arranging music for the ensemble. Since 2020, the group has released four critically acclaimed albums on BIS Records with several more in the pipeline. Almost all of the ensemble's albums feature Julian's arrangements and transcriptions, many of which have also been performed by other groups including Scottish Ensemble, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, Kaleidoscope Chamber Orchestra, Ebony Ensemble, Lapland Chamber Orchestra, and Dutch national ballet company Nederlands Dans Theater. His transcription of Gareth Farr's Mondo Rondo is available from Promethean Editions.

Julian has a keen interest in Middle Eastern music. For this recording he is grateful to have been loaned a fine violin by Joseph Rocca and is fortunate to play with bows by Nicolas Maline and Christopher Graves.

RUTH GIBSON

Irish violist Ruth Gibson is an expressive artist who's freedom and malleability show itself in her great range of collaborations. As an internationally recognised chamber musician and soloist she has appeared at the world's leading concert halls, including Wigmore Hall, Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Centre, Het Concertgebouw, Queen Elizabeth Hall and Berlin Konzerthaus.

As soloist she has performed under Sir John Eliot Gardiner with the Bournemouth Symphony, in 2021 she gave her BBC Prom debut with Manchester Collective and recently collaborated with SANSARA on a tour of Morton Feldman's Rothko Chapel. Ruth is Principal Violist with Aurora orchestra interpreting great orchestral repertoire from memory; from Beethoven to Berlioz. She is also the violist of Sirocco, a collaboration between Manchester Collective and Abel Selaocoe celebrating musical traditions from across the globe.

“Azkoul and his group feel fresh, dissolving a lot of conventions in both programming and performance”

– Gramophone 2024
on United Strings of Europe

SANSARA

Lucy Cox
Fiona Fraser
Charlotte La Thrope (1, 6, 8, 11)
Daisy Walford
Clover Willis
Amy Wood (6, 8)

Izzi Blain (6, 8)
Amy Blythe
Rosie Parker
Anna Semple (1 - solo)

Tom Castle
David De Winter
Jonathan Hanley

Simon Grant (1, 11)
Piers Connor Kennedy
Augustus Perkins Ray
Ben Tomlin

Artistic Director & Conductor
Tom Herring

UNITED STRINGS OF EUROPE

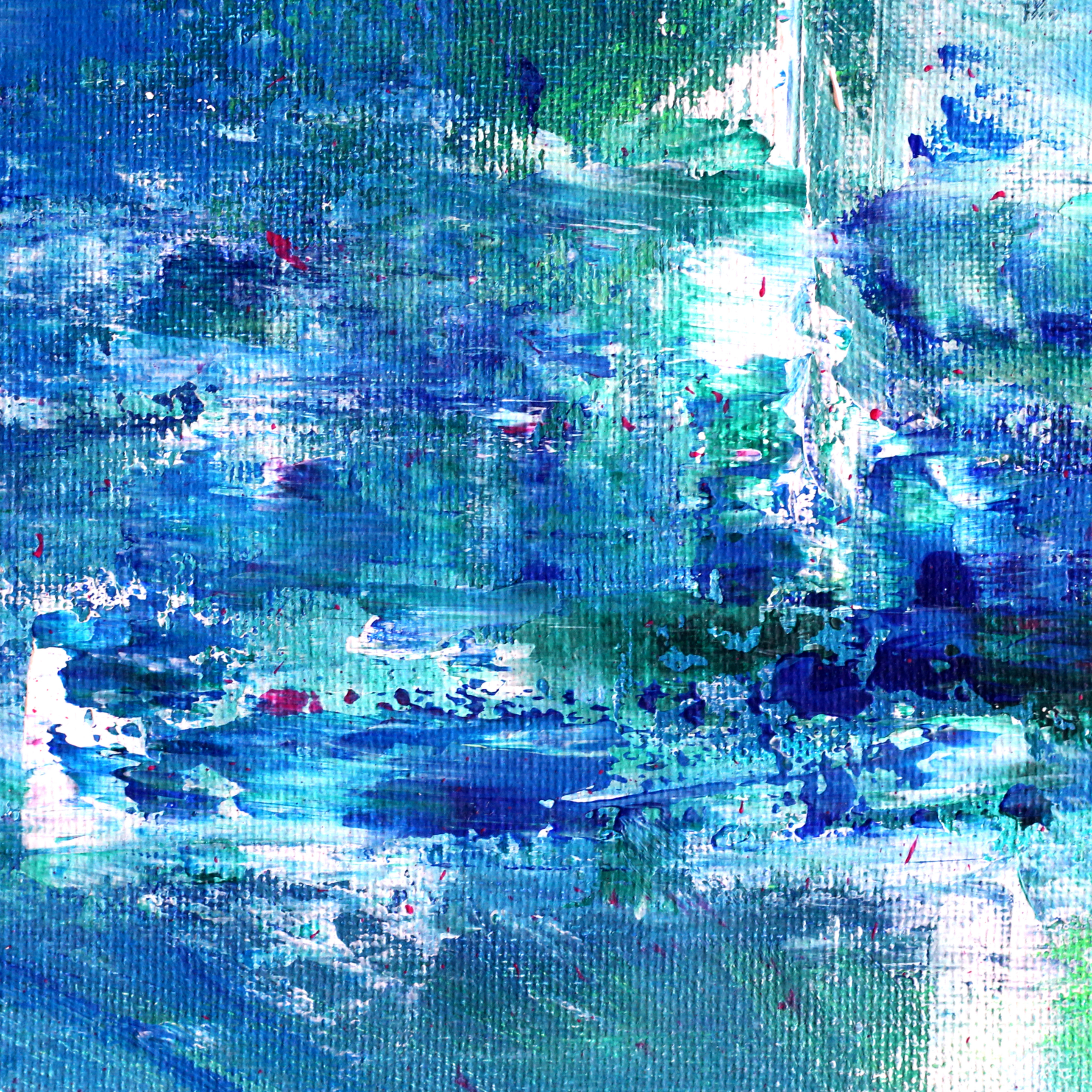
Violin I
Julian Azkoul
Eleanor Fagg (10)
Guy Button (10)
Rebecca Harris (10)

Violin II
Ariel Lang
Hannah Bell (10)

Viola
Kay Stephen
Christine Anderson (10)

Cello
Raphael Lang
Kirsten Jenson (10)

Bass
Toby Hughes

Artistic Director
Julian Azkoul

Artistic Direction Tom Herring & Julian Azkoul
Producer Matthew Bennett
Sound Engineer Dave Rowell
Artwork Tom Herring
Session photos Venetia Jollands
SANSARA group photos Matthew Johnson
USE group photos Dimitri Djuric
Venue All Saints', East Finchley (13-15 November 2023)